

Impact of First Railroads

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Before the first railroad lines were built in Livingston County in the 1850s, relatively few pioneer settlers came to the County and farmed. Two primary factors dramatically changed life in Livingston County in the 1850s: a new law passed by Congress and the introduction of railroads.

Valentine and Rachel Darnall were the first settlers in Livingston County. In 1830, they settled on Indian Creek south of present-day Fairbury. The land at that time was swampy, with prairie grass in the open areas and timber growing along the creeks and rivers.

Livingston County was formed in 1837. According to the U.S. Census, there were only 759 pioneer settlers residing in Livingston County in 1840. The County has 1,055 square miles of land. In 1840, there were only 0.72 people per square mile in Livingston County.

By 1850, there were 1,552 people living in Livingston County, which equates to 1.5 people per square mile of land.

Life was relatively difficult for the pioneer settlers who came from the 1830s to the 1850s. With no railroads, there was no way to bring in supplies needed for farming or ship out farm products. Pioneer farm families had to be completely self-sufficient.

In 1832, the William McDowell family emigrated from Sciota County, Ohio, to a location about six miles north of present-day Fairbury on the South Branch of the Vermilion River. There were no sawmills or stores to buy supplies for them to build a cabin.

The McDowells immediately proceeded to erect their cabin. The principal tool used in its construction was an axe. They brought with them a few panes of glass from Ohio for a window in the new cabin. None of their neighbors had any glass for windows in their log cabins.

The McDowells needed some flat boards for the frame of their window and the cabin door. The Kickapoo tribe at Oliver's Grove, about three miles south of present-day Chatsworth, had hand-hewn some logs into flat boards. The McDowells made a trade with the Kickapoo. The Kickapoo traded their flat boards for a supply of ammunition. The flat boards were transported 18 miles from Oliver's Grove to north of Fairbury with an ox team.

John Johnson was another pioneer settler who came to Rook's Creek, just west of Pontiac, in the 1830s. In the Fall of 1834, John Johnson and his sons killed 75 deer. They

transported the deer skins and hams by wagon to Ottawa, where they sold them for \$65. This amount is equivalent to \$2,015 in today's dollars.

Pioneer farmers needed a way to mill their grain into flour, which could be used to make bread-related food products for the family to consume. Early farmers only had two choices of where to take their grain to be milled. the most popular choice was to haul it by oxen-drawn wagon to Green's Mill in Ottawa. This mill was opened in 1830 by John Green on the Fox River about five miles northwest of Ottawa. Farmers had to haul their grain from Livingston County about 60 miles to Green's Mill on the north side of the Illinois River. Farmers often had to wait a day or two before it was their turn to get their grain milled. Farmers going to Green's Mill usually did some "store trading" at stores in Ottawa.

The other option to get grain milled was a mill on Crow's Creek, south of Peoria. This mill was also about 60 miles from Livingston County. Mr. Francis J. Moore, another pioneer settler, recounted that his first trip to the mill on Crow's Creek took one week. Sometime later, a new mill was built at Wilmington, but it was about as far away as the mill on Crow's Creek. The first mill in Livingston County was built by Mr. Smith in Fairbury in about 1840. Mr. Smith's little mill was powered by horses and not by water.

According to the 1878 Livingston County history book, Martin A. Newman of Newtown Township was the pioneer merchant of the County. In 1847, he left his home in Ottawa and made a tour of Livingston County. Mr. Newman could not find a single store in the entire County. He decided to start a new business. He bought and fitted up a peddling wagon, filling it with a great variety of merchandise, ranging from a needle to a wash tub. Once a month, Mr. Newman and his peddling wagon visited every family living in Livingston County. In exchange for his goods, Mr. Newman accepted deer skins, mink skins, ginseng root, feathers, and many other articles. Mr. Newman became a favorite of the early settlers, and he soon built up an extensive and lucrative business.

Thomas McDowell was one of the McDowell family, who were early settlers north of Fairbury. Mr. McDowell recounted that when he came to Avoca, there were but three settlements between the Wabash country in Indiana and this place. The people did their milling at Green's mill, on the Fox River, and their "store trading" at Ottawa. Mr. McDowell's first trip to mill his grain was to Green's Mill, which took four days. Mr. McDowell contracted with a neighbor to take 24 bushels of grain to mill and have it ground for which he received fifty bushels of corn, worth the enormous sum of ten cents per bushel.

Salt was a key ingredient for early pioneer settlers. With no refrigeration method available, the only way to preserve meat was to pack it in salt. The 1878 Livingston County history book notes several cases where pioneer settlers had to travel 100 miles to Chicago to buy salt. Some early pioneers took their grain to Chicago to sell, and some cattle herds were driven from Livingston County to Chicago for sale.

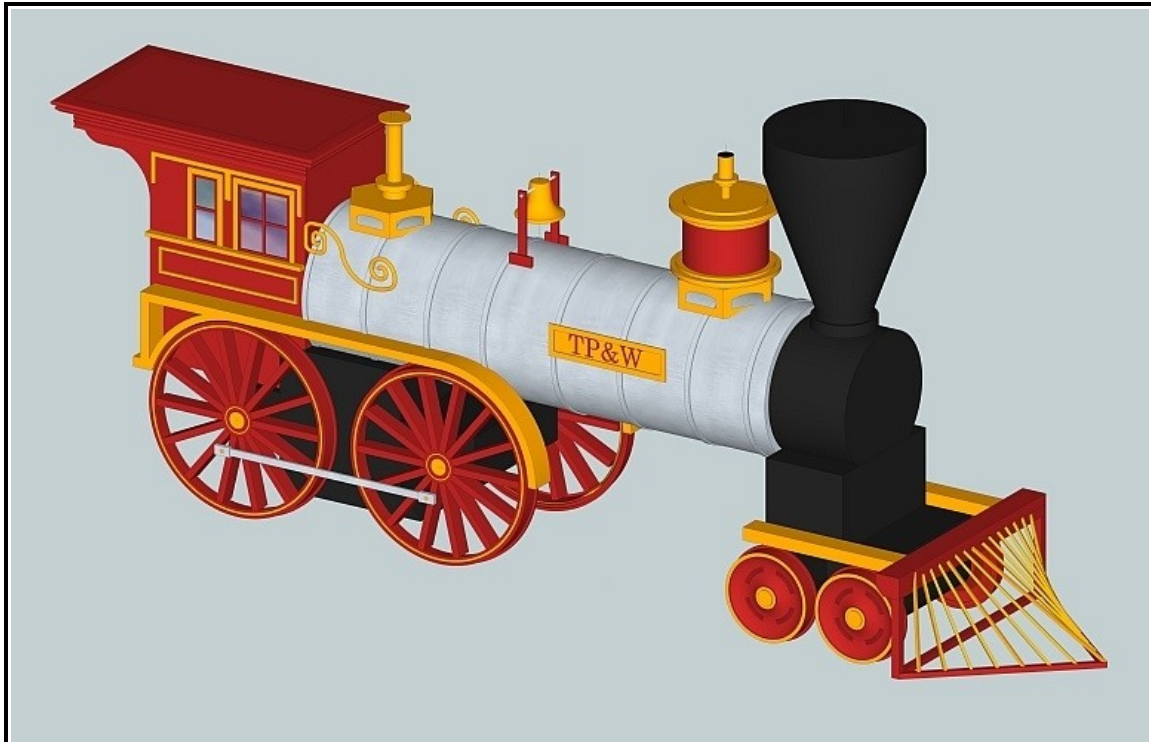
The Kring family were early settlers just north of Fairbury. John Kring recounted that he went on a trip to Chicago with his father. The elder Kring had one of the old-fashioned carriages, which cost him \$600. They made the trip to Chicago in it, and while there, Mr. Kring was offered 160 acres of land in trade for the vehicle. As the land was under water, Mr. Kring decided he preferred the prairie of Livingston County. A few decades later, that 160 acres of land became downtown Chicago and was worth millions of dollars.

In 1850, Congress passed a Script Act, which awarded free land primarily to veterans of the War of 1812. Since most of these veterans were located on the East Coast and were in their 60s, most of them had no desire to relocate to the swamp lands of Illinois. These veterans sold their land rights for about 10 cents on the dollar of the Federal government's price of \$2.50 per acre. This Script Act caused a land rush to Central Illinois between 1852 and 1860. Many farmers moved to Livingston County to take advantage of the cheap land purchased using the veteran's grants. By 1860, all the land in Livingston County was purchased and claimed.

The first railroad to be run in Livingston County was the Chicago & Alton in 1854. This railroad ran in a north-south direction through Pontiac. The next railroad was the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad, which ran its tracks in an east-west direction from Peoria to the Indiana Border in 1857.

New towns sprung up along the new railroads. Existing villages not lucky enough to be on a railroad line quickly became ghost towns. The railroads revolutionized the lives of the farmers in Livingston County. They gave them an easy way to buy machinery and other goods needed for their farming enterprises. Railroads also provided an easy way to ship livestock and grain products from their farms to consumers in large urban areas. Railroads also shipped consumer goods that could be easily sold to farm families.

Because of the Federal Government's 1850 Script Act and the introduction of railroads, the population in Livingston County soared from 1,552 in 1850 to 11,637 in 1860. Life for the typical farm family in Livingston County was dramatically improved because farm families utilized the railroad to bring in needed supplies and to export the livestock and grains they produced on their farms.



The introduction of railroads in Livingston County dramatically changed the lives of the early pioneer settlers. One of the first steam locomotives purchased by the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad in the 1850s was made by the Latham Company in Vermont and this is a modern drawing of this locomotive. The Peoria & Oquawka Railroad later changed its name to the TP&W Railroad and its tracks run parallel to Route 24 through Livingston County.